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JERRY GORE

## The Great Cross Pillar

*(Plates 15, 16)*

Beneath the Arctic Sun lies a land forgotten by time and virtually untouched by modern man. Starting at the Arctic Circle and stretching north for 350 miles, Baffin Island is the Big Wall climber's quintessential dream! Twice the size of Great Britain, this northern giant harbours a wonderful secret: the Great Eastern Fjords. 26 major fjords, 18-70 miles in length, cut Baffin Island's east coast, and offer some of the biggest, steepest rock walls on the planet. Apart from a small foray by two American climbers in 1992, this huge region was still virgin (or so we thought) when Warren Hollinger and I first began researching it in the autumn of 1994.

I had only recently returned to the UK after a late summer's trip to the Bugaboos; Warren and I had succeeded in establishing a new 1000m route over eight days, and getting struck by lightning on the summit as our reward! Consequently, I was still enjoying the unique experience of being completely uninterested in climbing, and could calmly look a guidebook squarely in the face without feeling depressed at the prospect of being stuck behind a desk. But when I happened to read a 12-page article by Eugene Fisher on Baffin Island, my urge to climb came flooding back and I found myself totally smitten with this Arctic Big Wall paradise. Coincidentally, so was Warren thousands of miles away in Hawaii. In true Hollinger style Warren's only thought was to attempt the biggest thing available. The stupendous North Face of Polar Sun Spire, lying deep within the confines of Sam Ford Fjord, the most impressive of the 26 fjords, became the immediate objective. Polar Sun presented a dead vertical sweep of granite estimated by Eugene Fisher to be over 4200ft high, greater even than the huge 3800ft West Face of Mount Thor in the southern sector of the island.

We faxed and phoned throughout the winter, Warren in Hawaii and myself in Gloucestershire. On 13 May 1995 I flew into Montreal through the early morning light; Warren was waiting for me and he had brought with him, instead of the original third member of the team, a Colorado climber, Mark Synnott. Mark was a very able replacement – his old buddy with whom he had done a number of hard Valley nail-ups, as well as the Nose in a day. We were a trio, and suddenly life cranked up a gear as we plunged headlong into a frenzied two-day session of Wall provisioning and logistics.

As we flew into Clyde River, the tiny Inuit settlement before the ice, reality hit. It was well below zero, and the only thing I could make out

through the swirling snow was a solitary Portakabin, which was THE airport, and a mean-looking guy wearing a bear fur jacket and a look that matched the frozen wasteland that surrounded us. Jushua Illuaq was to be our invaluable guide and Arctic mentor for the next week.

Within 48 hours we were on our way, powering across the ice on skidoos and into the Arctic vastness that is the Eastern Fjords. The violent sea ice peculiar to East Baffin ensured that our venture would have a seriousness and isolation rivalled only by Antarctic climbs. The ice-choked eastern coast of Baffin has been aptly called 'Canada's Pole of Inaccessibility' owing to its total isolation. The views coming into Sam Fjord were absolutely stunning and we begged our guide to take us on a tour of the very peaks we had dreamed about from the pages of Eugene Fisher's article. But a few hours later we decided to abandon Polar Sun as our prime objective because of the vast amounts of early-season snowfall. We opted instead for the Gothic might of the Great Cross Pillar, and its awesome south face. Great Cross is so named because of a distinct cross that can be seen to the west of the main pillar. Formed by black water streaks, the cross was not obvious until pointed out to us by a village elder.

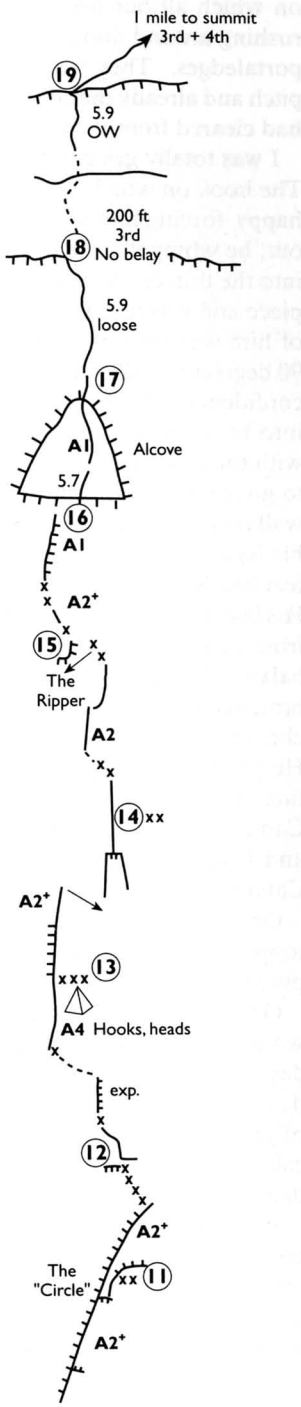
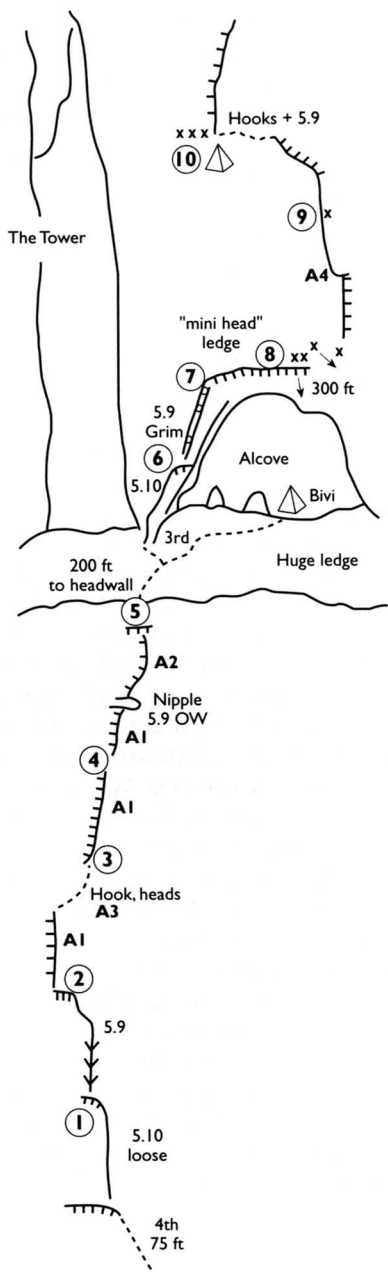
We pitched camp underneath the face on the rock-hard sea ice. Celebrations were in order: we had arrived intact and we had a stunning objective right in front of us. On cue, Warren produced the old Jack Daniel's. Everything would have been fine except that we had not yet had time to adjust to the constant daylight at these latitudes and had been without sleep for at least 24 hours. Moreover, our last full meal had been over 12 hours ago. The raw alcohol hit deep, affecting us in various different ways. Mark fell over, unconscious; I started to run around dementedly, fearing a polar bear attack at any moment; whilst Warren suddenly grabbed the rifle that we had been advised to carry because of the bear threat. He rushed out of the tent and proceeded to blaze a trail of wanton destruction. Ice, rock, plastic barrels, all succumbed to the onslaught. Eventually I managed to wrest the deadly weapon from his shaking hands. He collapsed in the tent and fell instantaneously into a deep sleep. The Polar Sun had made a complete circle above our heads before we surfaced again.

Having well and truly established Base Camp we immediately started fixing rope, working on a line up the overhanging central buttress of the 850m pillar. We spent five days fixing, and then cut loose and blasted for the top. On the fourth day on the wall, I took up the belay as Warren proceeded to lead out a ten-hour horror pitch. It started as a hook traverse on crystals across to a 'death block'. This was so named because it rested on a sloping edge at the start of the seam Warren was about to follow. If he fell he would take the rock with him, slicing the rope in the process. Warren then ran it out on bodyweight No 1 Heads to the lip of a small overhang. Reaching way out in his aiders, he made a blind hook placement, rocked over onto it, only to see it oscillate wildly as he came up to eye-level with it. Twenty metres below I could sense the vibration of this tiny piece of metal,



15. Warren Hollinger at a belay on The Turret, Baffin Island, while climbing *Nuvualik*, a new route on the West Face. In the background, the Great Cross Pillar. (Jerry Gore) (p50)

Crossfire (VI 5.10 A4)  
 'South Butress, Baffin Island, Great Cross Pillar'  
 May 19 - June 3, 1995  
 Warren Hollinger, Mark Synnott, Jerry Gore  
 3000'



on which all our destinies depended. Mark, a full 100m below us, was rushing around doing multiple back-flips in an effort to clear the hanging portaledges. They were in prime drop-zone position, directly below the pitch and already the beneficiaries of a number of large missiles that Warren had cleared from the route.

I was totally gripped by the awesome antics being performed above me. The hook on which Warren's whole life now depended was obviously not happy, forcing him to act quickly. Like a quick-draw pro in a pistol shoot-out, he whipped a small blade from his rack and threw a hand placement into the thin crack that issued up from the roof below him. He clipped the piece and was just about to weight it when the hook blew and all 14 stone of him went straight onto the fragile knifeblade. It immediately slid from 90 degrees to 180. Downward-pointing, hand-placed pegs just don't inspire confidence. With that in mind, Warren decided literally to take matters into his own hands. Faced with an imminent fall of around 60 metres, with the death block for company *en route*, he decided the best option was to go for a sloping ramp up to his left. Wearing a full Buffalo suit, a 30lb wall rack and with Koflachs on his feet, he grabbed the ramp; immediately his legs swung free and he hung suspended above the frozen sea ice 800 feet below. My heart fell into my salopettes as he mantelshelved the edge. His last decent piece of protection was a rivet level with the belay. Hanging from one arm, Warren pulled off a loose flake to create a foothold and balanced himself precariously on the tiny wet ledge. Directly in front of him, just within arm's reach, was a perfect No 2 Camelot placement. He checked the rack and screamed. I still had most of the cams at the belay. He yelled his instructions and I fastened the required units onto the zip line. Warren gingerly pulled the line in through his teeth, grabbed the Camelot and buried it to the hilt. A1 placement ... big relief! Both Mark and I were left stunned at the sheer death-defying bravado of this gnarly Canadian freshman, cranking it out in only his fourth year of climbing.

On 3 June, after thirteen days of capsule-style climbing, Warren and Mark topped out on the Wall. *Crossfire* (VI, 5.10, A4) climbs nineteen 60-metre pitches, and ascends the South Buttress Direct of Great Cross Pillar.

Once safely down Warren got a really bad cold, so Mark and I started work on our original objective, Polar Sun's huge North Face. After two days of climbing and over 700ft of ascent, we both decided that it was too dangerous to continue. The route was threatened by huge hanging blocks of granite in the crack line we were climbing. As it was, Mark had a close call while he was cleaning one of the pitches; the rope he was jumaring on dislodged a large boulder that caused a minor landslide.

With only ten days left before our scheduled departure, all three of us ferried loads to the base of the 700m West Face of Second Turret. We fixed five pitches during several days of bad weather, then made a 40-hour push up and down, establishing *Nuvualik* (VI, 5.10+, A3+). *Nuvualik* is the Inuit word for the formation, and means 'high point'.



*Above*

16. Polar Sun Spire, Baffin Island:  
*The Great and Secret Show* (4400ft)  
goes straight up the middle of the  
North Face, to the right of the  
obvious ice streak.  
(Warren Hollinger) (p52)

*Right*

17. The first hanging camp on  
Polar Sun Spire.  
(Warren Hollinger) (p52)



Near the summit, we were shocked to find a vintage bolt. Mantelling onto a small ledge just below the top, Mark found an ancient-looking 3/8 inch bolt with a heavy steel hanger. The Turret would clearly not be a first ascent (though our West Face route definitely *was* a first ascent) but we were totally perplexed as to who might have climbed this mountain before us. It was only after consulting that old Big Wall guru Geoff Hornby many months later that the truth emerged. A Swiss team had visited the area in 1987 and had actually climbed two routes on The Turret. One of the climbers was a very young Xaver Bongard, now famous (posthumously) for his ascent of *The Grand Voyage* on Great Trango, the mother of all Big Walls.

Climbing on The Turret was really extreme with pitches involving every discipline of the climbing game. One pitch that Mark led had both Warren and I staring in disbelief as he used free climbing and direct aid techniques to ascend an iced-up, overhung niche, which would not have looked out of place in the pages of *Cold Climbs*. Nicknamed 'The Tunnel of Hoar', this section resembled something like the iced-up interior of a wine bottle.

On top we realised we had to get off fast. Looking down into the fjord, we could see the unmistakable signs of early season break-up. Large cracks ran the entire width of the fjord and we knew it was only days before the skidoo would be unable to get in and many weeks would then ensue before the Inuit fishing boats would be able to rescue us.

Once back down from The Turret we crawled back to Base, soaked to the skin in the constant drizzle and bent double with our 45 kilo haul. Within 24 hours we were on the skidoos in a rush back to Clyde River to catch our flights home. But our adventures were not yet over. We ran straight into a horrendous storm and the skidoos got bogged down miles from shore in the early ice break-up. The machines stopped, we got drenched in the freezing slush, and suddenly frostbite and slow death seemed the likely conclusion to our otherwise successful expedition. At the eleventh hour, an Inuit team, also fleeing the storm, turned up out of nowhere and with their help we made it back in one piece ... !

For me it was the end of a brilliant trip, but for Warren and Mark it was really only the beginning. They had already decided to return the following year.

**Summary:** Jerry Gore, Warren Hollinger and Mark Synnott spent from 13 May until the end of June 1995 in Sam Ford Fjord, making the first ascent of the South Buttress Direct of Great Cross Pillar. *Crossfire* (VI, 5.10, A4) was done in 19 pitches over 13 days of capsule-style climbing. The summit was reached on 3 June. *Nuvualik* (VI, 5.10+, A3+), a new route on the West Face of The Turret (2000ft), was done in 15 pitches in a 40-hour push. The summit was reached on 22 June.